

Matthew 26:69-75

Introduction

It was all the way back in Matthew chapter four that we read about the calling of Peter to follow Jesus:

- ✓ Matthew 4:18–20 — While walking by the Sea of Galilee, [Jesus] saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Right from the beginning, Peter (with his brother Andrew) became a true example and model of discipleship – he *left* his nets and *followed* Jesus... *immediately*. The next time we encounter Peter is in chapter fourteen when the disciples see Jesus coming to them walking on the sea.

- ✓ Matthew 14:28–31 — Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Some have called Peter “impulsive.” Perhaps he was. But I’m not really sure this is fair to Peter. *Why* did Peter ask Jesus to command him to come to Him on the water? I wonder if there might have been a mixture of different motivations. Was Peter attempting to “prove his mettle”? Was he trying to demonstrate his credentials as a bold and courageous follower of Jesus? He did get out of the boat in the middle of a storm, and that *has* to say something. How many of us would have done the same? But on the other hand, it also says something when Peter, seeing the wind, begins to sink. The one that we might have thought displayed the *greatest* amount of faith by being the only one to get out of the boat is also the one to whom Jesus says: “O you of *little* faith, why did you doubt?” Patiently, and gently, Jesus seeks to teach Peter true humility – true dependence on God.

It was Peter who always seemed to be leading the way in seeking to know and understand the things Jesus said. But sometimes it was precisely this vocal search for knowledge that exposed a continuing lack of spiritual insight.

- ✓ Matthew 15:15–16 — Peter said to Jesus, “Explain the parable to us.” And he said, “Are you also still without understanding?”

Maybe we could say that Peter was passionate for knowledge (which was commendable), but he still had a long way to go in the acquiring of true *understanding*. And, of course, the danger of knowledge by itself is that knowledge puffs up (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1).

In chapter sixteen, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And it was Simon Peter who replied:

- ✓ Matthew 16:16–19 — “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

This was certainly a high point of Peter’s career. Peter has been privileged to see what many will never see – to see that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and now Jesus promises that he will be mightily used by God in the building His assembly (the church). Here we see in Peter a true man of faith – a man favored and blessed by the Lord. But then *immediately after* this high point in Peter’s life, we read this:

- ✓ Matthew 16:21–23 — From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Peter actually *rebukes* Jesus. Peter – the one who just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. And yet there can be no doubt that Peter is truly earnest, and genuine and sincere. He isn’t hesitant to speak what he believes to be the truth. But as a result of his boldness, *he* is now rebuked by Jesus for being a hindrance to Him, and for setting his mind on the things of men. The one who has displayed the greatest amount of spiritual insight and faith is now the one to whom Jesus says: “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter is in danger. For all of his zeal and passion (which would put many of us to shame), and for all of his certainty as to what is right and true, he has not yet learned true humility and brokenness. He has not yet learned to *distrust* himself.

We find Peter again in chapter seventeen:

- ✓ Matthew 17:1–4 — Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

This glorious vision of Jesus was far more to Peter’s liking than a Messiah who suffers and is killed. Peter wants this moment to last forever. He wants this to be the beginning of Messiah’s rule and reign. “Lord, it is *good* that we are here. If you wish, I will make three *tents* here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Peter is zealous and passionate for righteousness and for the glory of God. But he doesn’t yet truly understand. There is still no room in his thinking for suffering and death. And so while “he was still speaking... behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am

well pleased; *listen* to him” (17:5). The one who speaks out the most boldly for the cause of God’s kingdom and glory is also the one who must still learn to “*listen*” to Jesus. This time, it is in the very words of God the Father that Peter is challenged to *humble* himself – to be less confident in himself, and more surrendered to the will of God.

Later on in chapter seventeen, Peter is challenged by the temple tax collectors:

- ✓ Matthew 17:24b–25 — “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” [Peter] said, “Yes.” And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?”

We can easily hear the defensiveness in Peter’s voice, and then when he comes into the house, we can almost hear him questioning Jesus in his mind: “You do pay the temple tax, don’t you?” “We should be paying the temple tax, shouldn’t we?” As always, Peter is earnest. Peter is sincere. And yet, perhaps, Peter still has his pride. Peter is still concerned about the opinions of men.

We read about Peter again in chapter eighteen:

- ✓ Matthew 18:21 — Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

Once again, we see a Peter who is genuinely and sincerely passionate for holiness and righteousness. Which one of us would have come to Jesus and said the same thing? And yet we can almost detect a bit of self-righteousness and self-assurance. If the religious teachers say that to forgive a person three times is enough, then Peter will suggest seven. But “Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (18:22). There is not only teaching and instruction here. There’s also rebuke. Peter is still too confident in his own strength. He thinks that he could manage to forgive his brother seven times, and he thinks that this would be exemplary – even over achieving. So Jesus replies: “I do *not* say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Patiently, gently, Jesus points Peter to true humility – to a true distrust of self, and full *dependence* upon God alone.

In chapter nineteen, Jesus told the rich young ruler: “Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me,” and then He said to His disciples: “I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (19:21, 24).

- ✓ Matthew 19:27 — Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”

There’s a part of Peter that’s probably worried. Has he done enough? Can he be confident of a place in the Messiah’s kingdom? And to this worry, Jesus responds:

- ✓ Matthew 19:28 — Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Once again, we can see Peter's place as a true disciple and committed follower of Jesus. But once again, we can also detect in Peter's question a bit of self-righteousness and self-assurance. "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" And so Jesus concludes His response to Peter like this:

- ✓ Matthew 19:30 — But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

I prefer not to think of Peter as impulsive. I think of Peter as a man who was passionate and zealous for truth, and for righteousness, and for God's kingdom and glory. And in this sense, Peter would probably put all of us to shame. Wouldn't you agree? But there also seemed to be an over-confidence in Peter – a bit of self-assurance, and even of self-righteousness. At the same time that he was so sure of Jesus, Peter also seemed sure of himself. As sure as he was of Jesus, he was also absolutely convinced that Jesus was wrong – that there could be no possible reason for the Messiah (or for his followers) to suffer and be killed. Peter had not yet learned to distrust himself.

And so finally we come to the night that Jesus was betrayed. Jesus said to His disciples, "You will all fall away because of me this night" (26:31). And sure enough it was Peter who responded out loud, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away" (26:33). Peter's spirit was willing, and so he was *convinced* that he would stand the test. He really was convinced. But Jesus responded to Peter by warning him: "This very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (26:34). To which Peter replied: "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" (26:35). Here is the Peter who is zealous and passionate for *God's* kingdom and glory. And here is the Peter who is sure of *himself*. Peter will not deny Jesus. Even if he should have to go down fighting with Jesus, he will never deny Jesus.

When Jesus came with His disciples to the garden of Gethsemane, He went apart with Peter, James, and John, and said to them, "Remain here, and watch with me" (26:38). But when Jesus came to them a little later, He found them sleeping (26:40).

- ✓ Matthew 26:40–41 — And he said *to Peter*, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Here is the Peter that Peter himself has not yet come to see – the fleshly Peter who is weak, and not to be trusted. He has become more and more confused and sorrowful at Jesus' words, but he still can't muster up the will power to stay awake and pray. Peter still doesn't *see* his peril. And so as he has already done time and time again, Jesus patiently and gently rebuked Peter in order to teach him true humility, and true dependence upon God. "So, could you not watch with me one hour?"

Two more times, Jesus came to the disciples and found them sleeping. It was only when the mob came to arrest Jesus that Peter finally woke up. Now he would make good on his word when he said that if necessary, he would die with Jesus. He drew his sword and attacked. But Jesus commanded him to put the sword back into its place! When it became clear that Jesus would not resist, all the disciples—including Peter—left Jesus and fled. But Peter didn't flee very far. He followed Jesus at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest. And while Jesus was inside the high priest's house being falsely accused, Peter sat outside with the guards to see what the end would be (26:58). Except for one other unnamed disciple (John 18:15-16), Peter is the only one (and possibly the only one even of the twelve), who has followed Jesus this far. Here again, we see the Peter who has always been fiercely devoted to Jesus – the Peter who has always been zealous and passionate for the kingdom and glory of God. But for all his zeal, and passion, and devotion, Peter is faltering now. He's faltering, but he still can't *see* it. And so now we come to the last mention of Peter in the Gospel of Matthew.

I. Matthew 26:69–70 — Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.”

There was probably no real threat to Peter's life, or even to his physical safety. But Peter *felt* threatened. It was only a servant girl who pointed the finger at Peter. But Peter knew that others were listening. And so he denied it “before them all.” Instinctively, without thinking, the words slipped out. “I don't know what you mean” – which is to say, “I don't know what you're talking about. I was never with Jesus.”

II. Matthew 26:71–72 — And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.”

Peter has retreated to the outer entrance of the courtyard. Maybe he was hoping to find more safety there, or at least to ensure a quick escape if he needed one. But on the other hand, he could at least still hope to hear news of Jesus. In any case, Peter still doesn't go unnoticed. Once again, it's just another servant girl. But this time, she addresses the bystanders – “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” She's right, isn't she? For three years, Peter has been with Jesus, listening to His words. He has walked to Jesus on the water, and when he began to sink, Jesus saved him. He has witnessed firsthand all of the many miracles of Jesus. He has proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom in the towns of Israel (Mat. 10). He has confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. He has seen Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He was with Jesus in the upper room where He said that he would never fall away from Jesus or deny Him – even if he had to die with Jesus. And most recently, He had been with Jesus in the garden when His soul was very sorrowful, even to death.

The servant girl was right – “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” But Peter denied it, this time with an *oath*. He said, “I do not know the man.”

III. Matthew 26:73–74a — After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.”

Peter feels vulnerable, and exposed, and threatened. First it was a servant girl who said to him in front of the others, “You also were with Jesus *the Galilean*.” Then another servant girl saw him and this time said to those standing by, “This man was with Jesus *of Nazareth*.” And finally it was a group of those standing by who said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, *for your accent betrays you*.” Peter is an outsider in Judea. He has been with Jesus the *Galilean* – Jesus of *Nazareth*. His *northern accent* gives him away. There is still no real threat to his life, or even to his physical safety. But he feels threatened. He can hear the mockery in their voices. He doesn’t belong here. All he wants to do now is escape.

“Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man.’” “May I be damned by God if I’m lying, I swear under oath that I do not know the man” (cf. NLT; NET; HCSB). And so while Jesus was inside the high priest’s house testifying the good confession for Peter’s sake, Peter was outside in the courtyard denying that he knew who Jesus was. While Jesus was inside bearing the faithful witness that would lead Him to the cross as a sacrifice for Peter’s sin, Peter was outside bearing the false testimony that might help him avoid any contempt or mockery for having been in the company of Jesus. Inside:

✓ Matthew 26:63–64 — The high priest said to [Jesus], “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Outside:

✓ Matthew 26:73–74 — The bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.”

IV. Matthew 26:74–75 — And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

For all of Peter’s zeal and passion and earnest devotion (which would put most of us here to terrible shame), the one thing he had not yet learned was true humility and brokenness. He had not yet learned to distrust himself. So very gently and very patiently, over and over again, Jesus challenged Peter’s self-confidence and self-assurance. “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” “Are you also still without understanding?” “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.” And finally, “This very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” To which

Peter had replied: “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” But now the rooster has crowed. And now Peter remembers what Jesus said. And now he went out and wept bitterly.

Conclusion

Carson writes: “We may justifiably assume that Peter's bitter tears led to his being ‘poorer in spirit’ (Mt 5:3) the remainder of his days than he had ever been before.” Peter was finally *broken*. Peter has failed. He’s failed himself. He’s failed Jesus. He’s failed God. He’s failed everyone. So what about being the “rock” upon which Christ would build His church? What about wielding the keys of the kingdom of heaven? What about the last three years of zeal, and passion, and earnest devotion, and following after Jesus? In that moment, it felt to Peter as if he had just thrown it all away. And he *had* thrown it all away. Peter is a failure now – in every way imaginable. But as he was outside the courtyard now, weeping bitterly, I wonder if he ever remembered this saying of Jesus:

- ✓ Matthew 26:31–32 — You will all fall away because of me this night... But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.

In chapter twenty-eight, Matthew will be careful to say that there were “eleven disciples [who] went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them” (28:16). Eleven, *including Peter*. But even this would have been unnecessary to say, because by the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, Peter was recognized by everyone as one of the chief pillars of the church (cf. Gal. 2:9). “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saves wretches like us” (cf. Bruner). I think of Peter’s powerful sermons in the book of Acts. I think of the two wonderful New Testament books that bear his name. I think of his faithful leadership in the Church and of his ministry to the Gentiles. Though he probably didn’t know it then, Peter’s failure that night in the courtyard of the high priest had finally brought him to the place where he could be the most mightily, and powerfully, and wonderfully used of God.

And so we learn these two important lessons. We are all capable of falling in exactly the way that we are most sure we never could, and never would. Therefore, we should all be in a perpetual state of *brokenness* before God. If we would be used of God, we must completely, and totally, and absolutely distrust ourselves. We must renounce every last shred of self-confidence and self-assurance, and self-righteousness, and self-*anything* and fully depend upon the free and undeserved mercies and lovingkindnesses of God.

And we also learn that even in our worst and most dismal failures, God can still raise us up and use us for His glory. Isaac Williams has written:

“We may humbly venture to think that this melancholy failure in one so eminent and favoured was permitted to occur to afford us encouragement and hope in similar derelictions and temptations. And that as our Lord could not afford us an instance of human infirmity in Himself, He has given it to us in the person of the most exalted of His pastors: that all may fear, and none may presume, and all may hope” (via Plummer in Morris).

And so at the end of this dark story, we find ourselves looking not at Peter, but again *beholding Jesus* – the Jesus who will soon say to two women:

- ✓ Matthew 28:10 — “Do not be afraid; go and tell *my brothers* [including Peter] to go to Galilee, and there they will *see me*.”